

**RHODA PACK CURTIS**



## **RHODA PACK CURTIS**

**Rhoda Pack Curtis had a leather clothes business called Rhoda Pack Leathers in San Francisco's North Beach on Grant Avenue. Between 1945 and 1955 she recalls those early days of creating her business and of starting the North Beach Fair with other local merchants. Her business continued into the 1960's and expanded to national markets.**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Name	Rhoda	Pack	Curtis	Kurtzbond
	(First)	(Middle)	(Last)	(Maiden)
Address	2324 Eunice Street		Berkeley, CA	94708-1619
	(Street)		(City)	(Zip)
Date of Birth	02/21/1918		Place of Birth Chicago, IL USA	

Name	Date and Place of Birth	Date and Place of Death
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### PARENTS:

Mayer Kurtzbond	1869, Bucharest, Romania	1950, Chicago, IL
Ruth Esther Hoffman	1879, Braila, Romania	1949, Chicato, IL

### SIBLINGS:

Sara Sackron	1899, Bucharest, Romania	1986, Knoxville, TN
Jeanne Quadow	1903, Gary, Indiana	1994, Palo Alto, CA
Irene	1904 (Died at age 14)	
Al Curtis	1906, Chicago, Illinois	1996, Tiburon, CA
Fay Bauling	1909, Chicago, Illinois	(living in Palo Alto, CA)

SPOUSE:	Date and Place of Birth	Date and Place Married
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Jim Pack		1940, Sacramento, CA
Ric Skahen		1955, San Francisco, CA
Bob Holdeman		1963, Berkeley, CA





CHILDREN: Date and Place of Birth

Richard Lucien 1957, Berkeley, California

How many grandchildren do you have? 2 Age ranges: 19 – 23

How many great-grandchildren do you have?        Age ranges:



PROJECT: TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS ORAL HISTORY

NARRATOR: Rhoda Pack Curtis

INTERVIEW DATES: January 10 and February 7, 2006

INTERVIEWER: Valerie Hearn

TRANSCRIPT DATES: October, 2006

TRANSCRIBER: Claudette Alison

EDITORS: Rozell Overmire

PHOTO EDITING AND

PHOTO COMPOSITION: Peter Overmire

[ ]: Transcriber's/Editor's Comments

[Rhoda Pack Curtis completed her memoirs in 2007 in her book: "Rhoda, Her First Ninety Years." It is an engaging story of her varied careers, her three marriages, and her early upbringing. This oral history covers only a small part of her life.]



## **Rhoda Pack Curtis**

This interview was taken in two parts on January 10 and February 7, 2006 in the home of Rhoda Pack Curtis in Berkeley, California by Valerie Hearn.

First Interview, January 10, 2006: [Much of the material in this interview can be found in the book, “Rhoda: Her first Ninety Years, A Memoir” by Rhoda Curtis, published by Book Surge, 2007.]

VALERIE: How did you decide to come to San Francisco?

RHODA: Well, of course, we (Rhoda’s husband, Jim Pack and Rhoda) had gone to school in Berkeley so we used to come to San Francisco on the weekends to hang out at various bars, Pacific Avenue, and so on. We loved San Francisco. I decided the only place I wanted to live was Grant Avenue, North Beach. That was the only place I wanted to go; wouldn’t even look anywhere else. It was 1945, March, and we found an empty storefront at 1541 Grant, that’s between Green and Vallejo. The odd thing about this place was – there was a front part of the store and we figured we would have that be our showroom and then we would live in the back. Well, the back part was all little rooms closed off by doors. That was pretty funny.

We go down the street and – you know the Figoni Brothers –one owned the New Tivoli restaurant and then there was the Figoni, who had a hardware store, and next to that there



was a pasta place and the other brother ran the transvestite bar on Broadway – Finocchio’s. Anyway, we go into the hardware store and we tell them that we decided [to rent]. Jim is still in his uniform and he [Figoni] looks at us and says, “Did you know that your commander-in-chief died?” Roosevelt had died that day. Jim takes off his hat and so on. He [Figoni] says, “Do you know what that place is that you looked at?” I said, “Well, it’s funny, it’s all doors.” He said, “Well, that’s a whorehouse.” [laughter] We’re academics, the concept of whores was an academic concept [to us]; what was that? So I said, “Well, what happened to them?” He said, “They moved upstairs.” [chuckle] Okay. All right.

So we bought what we needed and we moved in. Now this place had no bathtub. It had two laundry tubs and also a kitchen, which is where the stove was. So if you wanted to take a bath, you had your bottom in one and your legs in the other, and somebody poured water over you. [laughter] The rooms were painted black – weird. So we repainted them and we got some bricks and put them in the windows where we draped Jim’s belts. People would come by wanting to buy the bricks. [laughter] The idea behind the belts and the bags that was something else....

VALERIE: Did you rent that place?

RHODA: Yes, sure, it was the only one on the two blocks.

VALERIE: But you didn’t buy it, you rented it.





RHODA: No, no, no, we were always renting, always renting. So this is 1945 and across the street is the Blabbermouth Café which is where the local poets, Ferlinghetti and that gang, would hang out on Thursday night. You could get up and talk or read a poem or something as long as it didn't last more than, I don't know, let's say seven minutes and at the end of seven minutes you were pulled off. But it was a pretty lively place and this was real real Bohemia with artists like Sargent Johnson and so on living on the block. We lived there from 1945 to 1948 and then we moved down to 1461. 1461 was between Green and Union on Grant. Peter Macchiarini was across the street. So it's that block. That was the second place. It had a bathtub, very important. [laughter]

VALERIE: A step up.

RHODA: Yes. And better living conditions and a real kitchen. It was much, much better and more space for the workroom and more space for the showroom, definitely a step up.

[end of first recording]

Second Interview, February 7, 2006:

VALERIE HEARN: The last time we spoke you were talking about living and working on Grant Avenue in the 40's in 1945. You said that you lived right across the street from the Blabbermouth Café and you remember poets like Ferlinghetti, for example. If it's



okay with you I'd like to start out by just asking you if you recall any of those people and what they were like.

RHODA PACK CURTIS: First of all, we came to the street in 1945 and that was when we lived at – what was the original address?

VALERIE: You said 1541 Grant Ave. and then 1461 Grant Ave.

RHODA: Yes, 1541 was the place that was opposite the Blabbermouth Café and that was the place that had been a whorehouse. [chuckle] Since our last conversation, I was thinking how Grant Avenue and Telegraph Hill actually are characters in the drama of that area. Telegraph Hill was a very special place. Up on the hill were artists like Machesney... in that whole neighborhood. There was Henri Lenoir who ran Vesuvios. There was a vitality and a feeling of energy about that whole area that was really magical. In literature there are places that take on a life of their own. Greenwich Village at a certain period, Brooklyn at a certain period, parts of Chicago in Saul Bellow's work. Telegraph Hill and Grant Avenue was one of those places in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, and then kind of shading off in the '60s.

What I remember about the Blabbermouth Café is that it was on Thursday nights and it was also in an old storefront. Whenever we went over there, the place was full of smoke. Anybody could come and speak for – I don't remember whether it was ten minutes or twelve minutes, some kind of arbitrary figure, and if a poet was right in the middle of a



poem and the time ran out they were off. What I remember – of course, one's memory is affected by lots of things – is that Ferlinghetti was a tall, thin, sweet man. He had a very sweet face. I don't remember much about his poetry. I'm not sure that Allen Ginsberg was there in '45. I don't think he came until later.

VALERIE: You also mentioned Sargent Johnson.

RHODA: Sargent Johnson was a sculptor who lived up the street on the same part of Grant as our original spot, 1541 Grant. Then there was Art Carpenter, whose name is Espenet; he's still alive. He lives in Marin somewhere.

VALERIE: Do you remember anything about these people?

RHODA: What I remember is that I coveted Espenet's woodworking. He made the most gorgeous wooden bowls, hand-turned.

VALERIE: Did he have a shop on Grant Avenue?

RHODA: He had a small shop and he exhibited at the Grant Avenue Street Fair. That's what I remember about Espenet, but it would be difficult for me to try to bring up his face. Of course, he might look quite different now. On the street at that time was also Gretchen McAllister who had a shop selling, oh, stationery, cards made by various artists. She also did what I call costume jewelry but it was nice, it was cute. Then, of course,



Pete Macchiarini [the Jeweler] was, I think, maybe the original artist on the block, predating me, and GeneWright who was a photographer. Gene was, I think, the first photographer to really explore and use a panoramic camera. He did a lot of work for the Sierra Club and for the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. There was a Chinese laundry next to me and later on in the '50s, Benny Bufano [the sculptor] had a place on the corner. But you're talking about the '40s.

VALERIE: Could you give me a flavor of the street in the late '40s.

RHODA: One of the marvelous things about it was that it was peopled by Italians who brought their culture with them. At a certain time of the year everybody on the street made wine. I have to tell you [laughter] the gutters ran red. There was a huge winepress that traveled from household to household and we would watch it go down the street. Accompanied with that were the vats that go with winemaking. There was a very village like atmosphere coupled with all those bars. I think we counted – at one time - I think we counted sixteen bars in a square block. I'm not sure, that might be an exaggeration. On the corner of Grant and Union was a bakery and anybody who was still up at 2:00 or 3:00a.m. in the morning – and there were lots of people who were still up and talking and having a drink here and there ...

VALERIE: Is it the same bakery that's still there, the Italian-French Bakery?

RHODA: I think so. Is it still there?





VALERIE: Yes.

RHODA: Fantastic.

[pause to change tape]

VALERIE: Yes, I definitely think you should go back [to Grant Ave.] and visit. Visit me when you come too.

RHODA: Yes. And I have to see Danny Macchiarini [Peter Macchiarini's son] because he says he had some photographs of the Fair that I might not have. So I'm definitely planning on it.

Well, at 2:00 or 3:00a.m. in the morning – and I was often awake because I would work late – I would go over and stomp on that metal grate – boom, boom, boom. And they would open the thing and I would go down into the bakery. And I have to tell you, the smells and the aura of that underground bakery was just amazing. Everybody was kind of happy and the yeast was rising and they were punching the dough and getting it ready. I would buy, at a very low price, fresh bread right out of the oven and take it back up the steps and go back to the shop and have myself a middle of the night snack. [laughter]

Now that's something you just don't forget.

VALERIE: Sounds wonderful.



RHODA: And then, across the street, of course, was Iacopi's Butcher Shop. Is that still there?

VALERIE: No.

RHODA: Well, Iacopi and his father – it was a family from Florence and there was a mural on the wall, back of the counter, of what some artists who had talked to the Iacopis thought was a picture of their place in the hills behind Florence. Bruno weighed about three hundred pounds and he was a real character, again, a North Beach character. He knew that Jim and I were poor artists and were struggling. He recognized that. He also appreciated the fact that we were trying to make a living by making things by hand. I would go over to buy hamburger. Well, what was that hamburger? It was the tailings of filet mignon steak.

VALERIE: Wow.

RHODA: He provided the meat for the New Tivoli restaurant and for other fancy restaurants in North Beach. So, of course, the tailings from trimming off the steak... he would grind that up and sell it to us as hamburger for 25¢ a pound. We had the best hamburgers you can imagine! To show my satisfaction – I was a great baker of lemon chiffon pie – so Saturday morning I would bring over this fresh-baked lemon chiffon pie and all the Italian ladies in the neighborhood would look at me with dagger-filled



glances. Who was this thin 27-year-old person bringing lemon chiffon pies to their favorite butcher? They were sure that there was some hanky-panky going on, but I was just saying thanks to Bruno. So those are things that made Grant Avenue so special. I don't know what it's like today but I'll have to go and find out. It's been a long time.

VALERIE: It sounds like it was a real close-knit community.

RHODA: It was. That's what made it possible for us to have such a successful street fair in 1955. Now I'm jumping ahead. Do you want to talk about the street fair?

VALERIE: Sure. Could you tell me a little bit about how it came to be?

RHODA: Okay. Jim and I divorced in 1950 and in, I think, 1952 I met a man named Richard Skahen, a physician who had spent a good part of the post-war period in Germany. He mentioned that he had gone to a lot of art fairs in Germany, in many small towns. And one day I was talking to Macchiarini and I said, "You know, Ric was talking about street fairs in Germany," and we looked at each other and we said, "Why don't we have a street fair?" That's really how it all started. So we would meet in the upstairs room of the New Tivoli Restaurant..

VALERIE: You and Peter Macchiarini?



RHODA: Peter and Gretchen and GeneWright – I don't think there was anybody else on the street at that time, maybe Espenet would come to a few [meetings], maybe Sargent Johnson came once in a while but the real organizing group was really Gretchen McAllister, Pete Macchiarini and me. There we are in this banquet room above the New Tivoli and another Figoni brother would send up plates of spaghetti, and there was always a bottle of red wine sitting on the table and, once again, it was this community getting together to plan something. Well, we had to make a few rules so Pete Macchiarini and I decided that one of the things we wanted – we always believed - was that artists should be able to sell directly to the public, not going through an intermediary or an agent. So we decided, among other things that we talked about, that any artist who was invited to participate in the street fair would have to have had a one-man show or participated in a group show somewhere and be making his living from his art. We didn't want any Sunday painters. We didn't want any amateurs. These had to be professionals. That was the guiding spirit. So then, what about the mechanics? Well, we looked at the street and we decided that the parking spaces would be perfect for a stall of some kind and if we could get the street blocked off, then artists could come and set up their wares in these stalls. If somebody wanted two stalls, well, they had to petition for it. Nobody paid anything to join. Well, there had never been a street fair in San Francisco. Ours was the first. So there was a question of persuading the Police Department to close the street.

VALERIE: So how did you do that?





RHODA: Peter and Gretchen and GeneWright – I don't think there was anybody else on the street at that time, maybe Espenet would come to a few [meetings], maybe Sargent Johnson came once in a while but the real organizing group was really Gretchen McAllister, Pete Macchiarini and me. There we are in this banquet room above the New Tivoli and another Figoni brother would send up plates of spaghetti, and there was always a bottle of red wine sitting on the table and, once again, it was this community getting together to plan something. Well, we had to make a few rules so Pete Macchiarini and I decided that one of the things we wanted – we always believed – was that artists should be able to sell directly to the public, not going through an intermediary or an agent. So we decided, among other things that we talked about, that any artist who was invited to participate in the street fair would have to have had a one-man show or participated in a group show somewhere and be making his living from his art. We didn't want any Sunday painters. We didn't want any amateurs. These had to be professionals. That was the guiding spirit. So then, what about the mechanics? Well, we looked at the street and we decided that the parking spaces would be perfect for a stall of some kind and if we could get the street blocked off, then artists could come and set up their wares in these stalls. If somebody wanted two stalls, well, they had to petition for it. Nobody paid anything to join. Well, there had never been a street fair in San Francisco. Ours was the first. So there was a question of persuading the Police Department to close the street.

VALERIE: So how did you do that?



RHODA: Well, we all decided that Rhoda was pretty persuasive. [laughter] So I was delegated to go down and talk to the Police Department. Well, I dressed up in my black leather jumper dress with a white blouse and a white bow at the throat, (which was the style in them [sic] days) and my white gloves and hat. That was what you wore in San Francisco, as you know, and I went and asked to talk to the Chief of Police. I wasn't going to bother with a sergeant. [laughter] Well, I guess they were pretty surprised, but I outlined the plan and said that I thought a good time to do it would be Father's Day in June when the weather would be good. And it would be for just one day and we would leave the center of the street open so that fire engines could get through and all these things we had to go through and so on. They sent a couple policemen to look at the street and gave us permission to close it from Vallejo to Green on Father's Day.

VALERIE: And that's 1955, right?

RHODA: But the planning went on before that. Of course, that was a period also where Benny Bufano had put his statue on the front part of the church [the statue was on the steps of St. Francis Church between Columbus Ave. and Grant Ave.]. Later on the church decided that the weight of the statue was cracking the cement of the front part of the top of the church step so that statue was moved down to the waterfront where it still sits. Benny Bufano was a close friend. Anyway...

VALERIE: So how did you find the artists?



RHODA: Well, Pete and I knew the artists. We went to ( I'm sure he did. I know I did.) art exhibits and so on and we – what did we do? Did we put any ads in? I don't remember. The word kind of got around. I'm not sure. Emmy Lou Packard, for example, up in Mendocino, was a friend of mine. I had been going up to Mendocino and talking to Zaca who ran the art gallery there. There were little communities of artists. We first of all contacted everybody on the street and said – well, of course, Sargent Johnson had contacts, and Espenet had contacts. I don't know where I met Brian and Edith Heath but I had met them somewhere. So one person told another and I think we ... maybe we went to heads of galleries in San Francisco. I know we contacted Brewer at Gumps. He was a man who considered himself a modern-day Medici [chuckle]. At the end of the war he had gathered up or accumulated a group of artists to sell exclusively in the gallery at Gumps and I knew a lot of those people – Wildenhein (a ceramicist) and so on. So those were our contacts and we just spread the word and asked people to contact either Peter or Gretchen or me. [laughter] It was kind of like submitting a résumé. Then we would meet every other week and decide who fit our criteria. We didn't try to do any kind of selectivity that way. So Bob Holdeman came and did art in action; the Heaths – Brian and Edith Heath, famous potters, were there; Eileen and Rossi Reynolds, whose pottery is at the Metropolitan Museum, lived up on the hill so they were part of the whole community also. Eileen and Rossi were very close friends; we met them shortly after we opened our shop. We used to take showers at Eileen and Rossi's place before we moved to 1461. They were wonderful friends. I'm not sure but I don't think Benny was in that first show. Who else? Well, of course, I think Danny [Macchiarini] and I can figure out who all was there. Do you remember that little bookmark I gave you with people's





# GRANT AVENUE STREET FAIR THANKS YOU

1933

*Wm. D. Miller*

*Many thanks to  
Tel. Co. for  
contribution*

*Plaza Theater  
P. Hallman  
Phoda Park*





signatures on the back showing the street? [Another copy of this bookmark is in the archives of the Telegraph Hill Dwellers.] O.K. I'll get it. Shall I go get it now?

VALERIE: O.K. Sure. [tape is turned off while Rhoda gets the bookmark] Ready?

RHODA: Yes. One of the interesting things about that whole idea was, again, to capture a village feeling and if you notice photographs of the time you'll see that there are living quarters above the street. Those were all Italian families and they were entranced with the artists. They thought this was just great. So Felix Rosenthal, who was a refugee from Germany ( he was an architect but also an artist), suggested that we have flags like banners across the street. Well, the only way that we could do that was to [chuckle] go into the houses of the people who lived above the street. We made all these banners with the flags and everything in the upstairs room of the [New] Tivoli. We put a weight, like a fishing weight, on the edge and threw it across [chuckle] the street and somebody in the window opposite would catch it and attach it. Well, you can imagine what a hilarious scene that was! We didn't have any tall ladders or anything like that. Of course some of them sagged and some of them worked out just fine, but it provided a real gay feeling to it. The other interesting thing that happened – I didn't marry Ric until 1955, maybe we were already married. Anyway, Ric loved classical music just as I did and he had one of those Stephens speakers which stand about four feet high and wide – one of those big ones full of woofers and weefers [sic] [tweeters] or whatever they call it. It gave a wonderful, wonderful tone. I liked Baroque music and there's a composition called *The Prospect Before Us* – wonderful, wonderful composition. We hauled that speaker down





Upper Grant Avenue Street Fair  
(with permission of Danny Macchiarini)



the steps – by this time I was living above the shop, not in the back of the shop – and we hauled that down and put it on a flatbed truck. In those days there were 78 rpm records and it was a hot day. Ric at that time was a pathologist for the Veterans Administration in Oakland and he was called to do an autopsy right in the middle of the day. Well, I was busy running up and down the street and whoever was in charge of the records was so ...

VALERIE: This is the day of the street fair?

RHODA: Yes. It was so hot that the wax records melted, [laughter] so we had to stop the music. But let's backtrack. We're going back to – you were talking about '45 to '50. That was 1945 at 1541 Grant, which was the days of the Blabbermouth Café and winemaking and all that. Now when we opened that shop we were making belts and sandals and handbags.

VALERIE: You and Jim?

RHODA: Yes. And I was working for the Office of War Information downtown at 111 Sutter Street. At that time I was writing propaganda for – working for the OWI, which really was a propaganda machine. I was writing propaganda for – it started out with Indonesia and then I wrote for broadcasts to China. 1948, you may remember, was the United Nations Conference in San Francisco. As a member of the news team I was a delegate for small nations. That was a rather heady time. I would go to work downtown and Jim would stay home making whatever orders we had. For example, we would hang



– we used bricks in the windows as décor to drape our handbags and things and for a while the only people who came in were people who wanted to buy the bricks. Well, my income from OWI is what allowed us to survive that first year. We would get an order for a handbag and we would take a deposit and go downtown to what is now Tandy Leather Company. It was something else in those days. We'd buy the skins, make up the bag, then we would always have a sample. We weren't making a lot of money because we were buying our leather retail. But little by little the models in San Francisco discovered us and started wearing our handbags and more and more people began coming. So little by little we built up our business and then when OWI folded, I was able to work with Jim full-time.

VALERIE: And when was that?

RHODA: That must have been 1948 after the United Nations Conference. Jim had come back from the Navy in a hospital ship and he was in a mental hospital being treated for depression. He was a great designer but he couldn't finish anything. I'd come home from work and I'd find these handbags, but the closure, the finishing part of it which the entire bag depended on wasn't done. I had to finish it. Well, if you make a mistake by that time, forget it. I kept saying, "Jim we have to design the bag from the beginning with the closure first," and that was part of what we began to do. Our designs changed. I had done some research on a stitch that was used in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. It's two needles that are threaded and you punch the holes and you put the two needles in the adjoining holes then you cross and come up the same hole. It's the same kind of idea that





was used to invent the sewing machine but you do this by hand and you do it with waxed thread. That's what we used for our handbags.

Then in 1948 I was really getting pretty fed up with this lack of a real bathtub. [laughter] I mean it was really getting to me. That was when we found the storefront at 1461 [Grant Ave.]. All of our friends and the artists around said that they would help us move so we packed stuff up in the boxes. Valerie, I wish I had a photograph of this! We had a stream of people walking from 1541 Grant to 1461 Grant with boxes on their heads or in their arms [chuckle] and there was a stream that went down and they would dump off the box and then come back and get another box. What they did was, they filled the space at 1461; they started in the back and came all the way to the front filling all the space with these boxes. I had tried to label them but, you know, after a while ... I think that was one of the sweetest things that ever happened and it was also very typical. Everybody [helped]. People showed up I didn't even know and said, "Can we carry a box for you?" [chuckle] We made our way through the boxes and went to sleep in the back and in the morning Jim said, "Boy, I would love a cup of coffee." I don't know how I did it but I dug out the box that had the coffee pot and we had a cup of coffee. Then there was the process of reconstructing that space. But that was pretty momentous.

That was a period when Robert Howard was making his statues in Golden Gate Park, the dolphins in front of the museum there [California Academy of Sciences] and Adeline Kent and Mary Erckenbrack, yes, she was a painter. I remember now. So having been launched into our new space, having a reputation that we were building up among the



models, that is really how the business grew. Macchiarini's jewelry was the same. It was all word-of-mouth. I don't think he advertised in any art magazines. Little by little the fashion magazines began to come around. *Mademoiselle* did a story; I don't even know what happened to it. But there was a paucity of hot copy between '45 and '50 and we just happened to be in that space. This is before – this is the early part of television so we would be invited down to studios... What was it ...CBS at that time, maybe – to appear as local characters, local color. I had seen a show where a man designed a dress on a woman on the stage and she was in bra and panties and he designed a dress using a big batch of fabric. This was 1950 already. I said to Jim, "You know, we could drape a model in leather and in suede for television." Again I went down to talk to the people there and there was one show that we did where Herb Caen was doing a commercial on maybe Wonder Bread or something like that and he's sitting there and the camera's on him – this is early television – and he's squeezing this bread and he says, "I wish you could see how soft and tender it is." And the person on the other side of the camera said, "Cut" and said, "Herb, they can see you. You don't have to tell them. They can see you." It was all pretty funny. All the models were our friends by now, because we either gave them the handbags or sold it to them for cost. They were wearing our belts, they're wearing our handbags, some of them were wearing our sandals and they were very visible, marvelous people. We had two of them [the models] and, of course, all the staff of the television station were hanging around watching and we did this show. I draped a model in smooth leather, which I was working with at the time, and Jim draped a model in suede. Well, you have to realize that it's very hard to pin leather so we used a staple gun. [chuckle] We did an off-the-shoulder thing and clamped it together with a big pin



and that kind of thing, it was fun. So that again was lots of free publicity. Then we began appearing at art fairs. But let's go back ...

[pause to change tape]

Let me tell you a little bit about the leather because I mentioned that I did a dress in smooth leather and Jim did one in suede. We were making handbags and belts and Cyril Magnin became interested. He came to see us and asked us if we would like to ... oh, the buyer came and then Cyril himself became interested in us. We went down to the store, Joseph Magnin at that time, and [they] asked us if we could produce a dozen handbags to start with and that just threw us for a loop, twelve handbags at once! Dear God! We decided we needed some help if we got this order and had to produce more. People would drop in. We had a lot of customers from the Social Register in San Francisco, and one day a woman named Taylor Reese came in. She was an heiress, a debutante who had been thrown out of Bryn Mawr. She always wanted to work with her hands, so I taught her and she became an employee. Then there as another young woman from Seattle, she became an employee. It turned out that our shop became a haven for displaced neurotics. [chuckle] Again, there was this family type atmosphere in the shop. When you're making a handbag by hand you have what is called a four-prong punch which is made of metal. You hit it with a hammer and then you move the punch over so that the fourth prong goes into the last hole, you're really hitting three holes at a time. Well, you can imagine how this builds up your shoulder muscles. I remember going to a party in a sleeveless dress and I lifted the cocktail glass and looked down at my biceps which absolutely popped up and I thought, "Oh, my God, I can never wear another sleeveless





**Rhoda at work  
1461 Grant Avenue  
Photo by Stoll**





“I want to make a suit.” She said, “Rhoda, you don’t start with a suit, you start with a skirt.” I said, “Eileen, I want a suit, are you going to help me or not?” She sighed and said, “Okay.” So I bought the wool and started laying the pattern out onto the wool and there’s five eighths of an inch seam. I said, “Why do we need five eighths, why can’t we do three eighths?” “You got to do five eighths.” All right. Then she wanted me to baste everything. I didn’t want to baste, it took too long. “Why can’t I sew directly onto the machine?” Poor Eileen, I must have given her a real hard time. I did manage to do the jacket with the set-in sleeves and the lining and the whole thing and that gave me confidence. To do a set-in sleeve, that was fine. We were going to go to a show, some exhibit at the De Young Museum, and I needed a dress. This was in the time of Claire McCardle, she designed the front and the sleeve that are all one piece and the seam is underneath, you don’t have any set-in sleeve thing, and a full-skirt with a wide cummerbund. That was the design in the late ‘40s. I got some green suede and as I was laying the pattern on the suede I noticed that this was an animal, right? So the hide is stretched out and the firm part of the hide is down the center where the back is but the sides are where the belly is and that was very wavy. It was almost like everything in the skin is on the bias. So I thought, “Well, if I cut along this line it’s not going to be a straight line because the leather itself will be wavy. If I lift the skin under the pattern on both sides it’ll give me a part of the hide that wasn’t all that stretchy.” That’s what I did. I didn’t realize that by creating this small wave under the pattern I was creating a shape to the skirt that could not be matched in fabric at all because it corresponded to where the legs are in a skirt. So I had an incredible shape, which was terrific. With great



trepidation I stitched up this green suede dress and I wore it to the opening and came home with three orders.

VALERIE: Fantastic.

RHODA: Yes, but they were three different sizes. I was a 10; I had orders for a 12, a 14, and a 16. What was I going to do? Well, I thought, "Okay, I'll take a course." So I went to a night school course at the Fashion Design Institute. Oh, my God, they were starting with the basics – with the pinning and the basting and all that, and I thought, "Not for me." So I went down to Stacey's bookstore and I bought a book on pattern grading, and following the book, I graded my size 10 pattern up to 16. I had already modified the pattern to three eighths of an inch instead of five, who needed that extra quarter-inch, it's not going to ravel. I cut the suede and the women came in for fittings. Well, the pins bent so that's when I started using the staple gun. All the designs worked and they loved it. So the word went out again and Mrs. Schwabacher came, Mrs. Haas, (you know, Levi-Straus) came; charming women. I remember doing riding pants for Mrs. Haas. They were just great.

But I really didn't like suede because first of all, it shed; secondly, [if] you got one drop of oil on it from the sewing machine ... it was very hard to work with. I thought, "We have gloves that are smooth leather, the smooth side of the hide, which are washable. Why can't we use that side of the hide?" So I went down to South San Francisco to the Le Gallet Tanning Company and I talked to a terrific guy named Moon Giovanetti.



Moon was a terrific guy. They did hides for hunters, deerskin. I said, "Well, the Indians washed their deerskin but I think it would be better if we could create a surface that could be just washed off, sponged off." He said, "Well, that would destroy the flexibility of the hide." So we talked a lot and I did a lot of experimenting and I said, "Can't we spray it with some kind of stuff that will resist water?" I met the Le Gallet brothers and they liked me and I liked them and they were just all very interested in doing something different. But it was too thick, I wanted a thinner hide. When you run a deerskin through a skiving machine it loses its tensile strength and it tears, so that wouldn't work. In the meantime I kept experimenting with designs and what I wanted was a jacket that would incorporate the Claire McCardle design of the front and shoulder all in one piece and one that would allow flexibility and that would fit onto the hides that I was working with. It was really a big challenge but that was fun. Finally Moon suggested that we try to get some cowhide, which would be a bigger skin, and I got in touch with The Santa Cruz Leather Company. They made leather for briefcases and things like that. In the course of this research I discovered a very interesting thing about the hide business in the United States. All the glove leather is made in Gloversville, New York, where there are special machines for dyeing, tanning, and putting the leather through big drums, which make it flexible and soft. The glove industry decided they would not ship any of those machines west of the Mississippi River, so that all leather manufacturing, hide manufacturing west of the Mississippi River was to be only what was called saddle leather, which is the leather for handbags, briefcases, and so on but no glove leather. I thought it was absolutely fascinating. I got that information from Moon and from Le Gallet and from the Santa Cruz Tanning Company.



I did a full-length coat which was skived down as thin as you could get it at one of the leather shows somewhere. It was exhibited but, my God, it weighed a ton. I didn't realize horsehide, which was used by the Germans for their military uniforms, also weighed a ton. But that didn't suit me, I wanted something light and flexible that would really work. So I think it was either Moon or one of the Le Gallet brothers who put me in touch with a man named Mr. Hyde of the Wood and Hyde Leather Company and I wrote to him and told him what I was interested in. Again, timing is so interesting in our lives. That happened to be the year when the tannery workers went on strike in Gloversville for higher wages. But the tanneries had made so much money during the war they didn't care, so they locked out the workers, which gave them a year to experiment. Here comes this goofy girl from [laughter] San Francisco with an idea of using glove leather for clothing? Whoa, ho, ho! Now I didn't realize that this was something that maybe was patentable. I was just fascinated by the idea. I don't know what was in the mind of Mr. Hyde but I think he recognized something valuable. So we began corresponding back and forth and he would send me samples and I would experiment and say, "No, this isn't thin enough; no, this isn't good." One of the things I learned about working with cowhide or trying to work with sheep hide from the U.S. is that it wasn't possible, because the hides were full of scratches from the barbed wire fences. I did manage to get some cowhide from the Santa Cruz Tanning Company and I did make one jacket which was absolutely gorgeous called the Flyaway. I think I showed it to you last time. No?

VALERIE: No.







**Rhoda publicity shot**  
**Photo by Stoll**



RHODA: Well, I still have that jacket. While I'm still experimenting with the Wood and Hyde Company, some photographers from *Harper's Bazaar* were in San Francisco. They came by the shop and saw the Flyaway jacket. They took it back with them to New York and, lo and behold, it was the inside cover of *Harper's Bazaar* of 1950. That was pretty interesting, but the back story of that is while I'm still experimenting and trying all this out there was another show at – oh, I know, the person from *Harper's Bazaar* said, “You have to have a retail store outlet before we can run this.” So I realized that we had to sell some jackets.

I was still pretty green at it but we were still working at it and around this time we were invited to a show at, I guess it was the De Young again, and I wore one of my newest creations. It was still suede, but I had done a stole in triangular pieces of green and beige suede backed by grey taffeta. The cummerbund was triangular patterns of green and beige. At that time I had a very long neck and I wore my hair long and up in a bun and I was standing in the gallery. Jim had gone to get me a glass of wine or champagne or whatever and a small elegant-looking man came over to me and said, “You look like a Modigliani painting. May I get you a glass of champagne?” I said, “My husband has gone to get one some.” He said, “Well, who designed your gown?” and I said, “I did, it's my design, we have a leather shop on Grant Avenue and we make clothes.” “Oh,” he says, handing me his card. “I am Paul Verdier.” This was the president of the City of Paris. He was one of two famous French brothers and they had a wine gallery on the lower floor of the City of Paris. He said, “Come and see me.” And I thought, “Wow!”



So Jim came back with the wine and Monsieur Verdier had left and I told him [Jim] about it and he said, “Oh, he was just trying to pick you up.” And I thought, “Come on, that’s crazy.”

So I made an appointment to see him and I took down this jacket, which I called the Flyaway. I had designed it in such a way that the seam that goes down the front, which incorporates shape for the bosom, the line went into a pocket and then that line continued around the back so that you had a continuous line which was necessary to fit into the hide but also created a design element that was really, really very nice. He liked it; he bought several jackets. He had a store in Seattle for which he ordered jackets. That gave me a retail outlet.

VALERIE: It worked out fine.

RHODA: So I had to hire a stitcher. I asked various people and a young woman came to work for me who was just terrific and that’s how we began making jackets and at that time it was cowhide. In the meantime, I’m working like mad with Mr. Hyde to get ... I said, “I have to have (and I learned by this time the word I was looking for was pyroxolene) a pyroxolene finish that you could wash off.” He’s experimenting with the hide, the shop is filled with [chemicals]. And, of course, I was also experimenting with glues and things like that because even though we ironed the seams flat with a piece of paper ( because otherwise the leather would stick to the iron) they wouldn’t stay flat unless there was a bit of glue. Elmer’s glue hadn’t been invented yet. You couldn’t use



rubber cement because that would make it too stiff. All the time I was working on developing flexible, smooth leather for jackets, I was also working on the glue so there were these containers of glue all over the shop too. I was trying different kinds and what emerged eventually was Elmer's glue from a lot of the experiments that I was doing. I had no idea. Well, inventors really don't know.

VALERIE: So you invented Elmer's glue?

RHODA: Well, I think I did a lot of the experimenting that allowed them to refine the thing, which is a lot of what happened with the pyroxolene finish. Mr. Hyde would send me samples and I would test it out and send it back, "No, too stiff." Once my jacket appeared this became a stimulus for designers in New York and Paris. Up until then the Parisian designers had been working with Angola suede. Beautiful, beautiful flat suede. But now the idea of Angola sheep being able to be used – this was a big push. This is very early on, you see, it was like ten years before leather ever became popular, which was one of the problems. I not only had no money behind me, I was ahead of the curve, as it were. We got quite a few orders from the City of Paris and then other retail establishments became interested. But at the same time Jim's mental condition was deteriorating. I don't know whether, [as] psychotherapists tell us, that in a marriage where one person moves up in power or strength the other one declines or what it was, but he couldn't finish things and he kept putting things off and he began to drink so it was getting very, very hard and that was why I finally decided to divorce. After that I





changed the name of the business from Designs in Leather (it started out as Jim Pack Leathers) to Rhoda Pack Leathers. That was the background.

The big explosion was after the divorce, 1952 on, and that was when I acquired accounts like I. Magnin and Neiman Marcus and Marshall Field and Lord & Taylor and the business expanded. But what was also interesting, back in the days when we had three or four employees – I guess that must have been 1948-49; no, I guess it must have been 1950 after the break with Jim because I had about three or four employees at that time. I had a couple of stitchers and the bag makers and so on. I called a man from the Leather Union and I said, “I have four or five employees and I think I should have a union.” He said, “Who is this?” I said, “It’s Rhoda Pack, I have a small leather shop.” He says, “You have five employees and you want to have a union?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “This I got to see.” [laughter] Out he came. I said, “Look, I have to hire a cutter because I can’t do all the cutting myself. I’ve been up until two and three o’clock every morning doing all the cutting, I’m exhausted. So if I hire a cutter and he goes on a binge, drinking ... (because cutters are well known to not be reliable), and I have a big order, I want to be able to call the union and say, ‘Send me a reliable cutter’ and the same with a stitcher. The stitcher gets sick or has a baby or whatever.” I said, “It’s supposed to work both ways, isn’t it?” And he said, “Yes, that’s the theory.” He said, “But the big question is do your employees want a union?” I said, “That’s up to you; you make your pitch.” By this time I was living upstairs and I left him alone with the workers.

[pause to change tape]





1952

**RHODA PACK  
LEATHERS**

**Cape Stole and Vest for Jean Varda  
1461 Grant Avenue shop  
Photo by Rondal Partridge**



And they decided okay, but they were still kind of uncertain about it. The way it was set up in the shop was that every stitcher, every person, made the entire garment and put her name or initials on the back, so everybody had a stake in how it came out. I did have a patternmaker who helped me make the patterns. I was cutting the linings and I had, I think, three stitchers and a finisher, and I think I had somebody who came in and helped me with the shipping and the sending stuff out. But the idea that each one – I said, “You have your name on it, if something’s wrong and it bounces back I know who to send it to to make the repairs.” They liked that kind of individuality and they wanted that to continue. I said, “Fine. The salaries are not going to change but if something goes wrong and there’s a time when I don’t have any business you might be able to get another job through the union.” That was the whole point. So that stayed. However the business expanded it was always a union shop, which apparently was something [chuckle] rather unique. My father had been a tinsmith in Romania and when they came to the U.S. he joined the IWW. So with a background like that, a Socialist father, there was no other way for me to go except the union. After I explained that to my employees, they accepted it.

Now you wanted to know about the day of the street fair, right?

VALERIE: Yes, please.

RHODA: Like the night before we had strung all those banners and there was great excitement, everybody was very excited. So early in the morning we struggled with this



huge speaker down the narrow steps of this – you wouldn't actually call it a tenement but maybe some people would – of this flat upstairs over the shop and pushed and pulled and got it up onto this flatbed truck which was stationed at the corner of Union and Grant. This is early in the morning, about 6:30. The artists began arriving and setting up their booths so we decided, well, we should put on some music and we put on music while the artists could come and put their stuff up [laughter]. Then we officially opened. We had some kind of portable barriers blocking off the street. People began arriving about 8:30 before we were totally set up and by noon the street was jammed with people and this whole business about keeping the center aisle free for fire escape, so fire engines could get through, forget it. It was sidewalk to sidewalk and everybody made money, everybody sold so Pete and I said this was validation that the good stuff sells. I'm absolutely convinced that that is absolutely true. We had stuff displayed in Iacopi's Butcher Shop window; he had taken all the meat out to put art in. We had things exhibited in the Chinese Laundry. It wasn't Chinese at that time, it was Italian. So there was this tremendous excitement. We had said it was going to be from 9:00 to 6:00, I think, so six o'clock people began [to leave].

Well, in the meantime, I decided that what we should do is we should have a end-of-the day party in my flat, because we had to keep the street clean. At that time I had a woman cutter for the patterns and she was almost six feet tall and weighed close to two hundred pounds, marvelous Italian woman. She said that she made the best spaghetti I'd ever tasted. So I got some huge buckets and she cooked spaghetti for everybody on the street and, of course, we got the French bread from the bakery, which I spread with garlic and





SAN FRANCISCO

# UPPER GRANT AVENUE ARTISTS & CRAFTSMEN PRESENT THE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL STREET FAIR

JUNE 17  
JUNE 18

## CRAFTS PAINTINGS POTTERY

Upper Grant Avenue Street Fair  
(with permission of Danny Macchiarini)



put it in the oven. We had an after-the-show party. Everybody came upstairs and we opened ...

VALERIE: This was just for the artists?

RHODA: For the artists. They all came upstairs and we opened all the bay windows and hung out and looked over the street and people talked about how much money they made and how enthusiastic they were and we toasted the fair and it was like one huge party which had started in the morning and went all day.

One of the things that occurred to me [when] I was telling you about the cutter.... All my patterns had to be transferred to heavy cardboard and bound with brass because if you use a paper pattern on a hide and use a sharp knife to cut around it eventually you're going to destroy the paper. So this is standard or was standard in the leather business that the patterns have to be transferred to thick cardboard and bound with brass. It's quite an investment in the pattern. Again, it requires quite a bit of strength to cut carefully around it and, boy, she was terrific.

The other aspect of making a garment out of leather is that since you're dealing with animal hides, the skin itself will take the chemicals and the bleaching and the dying differently so you have to lay your hides out on a sawhorse – they're folded – so that they are more or less the same tone because they will vary in tone and texture. That always has to go first. So there's a good deal of artistry required in every stage of making leather



# Leather's First Lady

By DOROTHY NEWMAN

News-Call Bulletin Fashion Editor

Feeling swayed toward suede, but worried about its upkeep? You needn't be, says Rhoda Pack, San Francisco's first lady of leathers, who explains that suedes (and all leathers) are now treated for water resistance which discourages spotting. And they respond admirably to grease-removing powder and to brushing.

Eleven years ago Rhoda Pack began to make bags and belts out of leather in an upper Grant Avenue studio. She catered mostly to the arty set who went for leather-thonged sandals.

Fascinated with the texture of leather and the challenge of matching and fitting, Miss Pack began designing and making jackets, coats and even dresses.

THEY WERE high-priced, of course; but they were forerunners of a general mass production of leather costumes which has swept the U. S. and has been a goldmine for fashion designers and manufacturers.

Miss Pack herself moved from Grant ave. to Mission st. 1½ years ago. In a cheerful loft she designs and cuts her smart leather fashions and then has them made up.

Rhoda's greatest love is for capeskins (the hair side of the pelt as against the inner, suede side).

She uses only glove-quality skins from the long-haired sheep of Angola, in North Africa, and has all of the pelts tanned at Gloversville, New York, by glove tanners who are the only workmen capable of giving them the butter softness which permits such versatility of design and draping.

They must be dyed clear through, and waterproofed, yet remain unscarred, soft and malleable enough to be handled like fine fabric.

TO PRESERVE their beauty, Rhoda's pathological husband, Dr. Richard Skahen, has created a new



RHODA PACK  
Leather Lady

cream "RPLCC" which softens and protects the pelts just as face creams protect our skins.

It takes from four to six perfectly matched skins to make a jacket, and from eight to 10 to make a coat, and each piece must be individually cut by hand so that it joins properly at a seam, yet contributes to the shape of the entire garment.

Rhoda's mastery of leather is obvious in her styles. Shoulders have an easy-fitting grace. Necklines are gently contoured and fit without gaping. Waistlines stay in place when arms are raised.

STRIKINGLY new looking in this season's collection are a spectrum of lovely, muted colors, and such silhouette highlights as a sleeveless coat, worn like a stole or straight with sides buttoned—reversible with worsted lining; a full-length evening skirt in sand-colored suede joined with gold key braid and matched with a leather jacket whose lapels repeat the gold key motif with bugle-bead embroidery; leather "sweaters"



GARBO SLOUCH is the name for this easy-fitting and very wearable capeskin coat which is one of the all-around favorites by Rhoda Pack, Roos/Atkins.

F. News-Call Bulletin ★ Tues., Nov. 24, 1939



clothes. I have no idea what goes on today but maybe the same thing because the prices are so enormous.

I notice that most of the leather clothes today are black. [chuckle] Well, you don't have to do much careful shading [with black] but my clothes were beige. Then I also began designing color. So as the idea of the leather business grew, Mr. Hyde asked me about color and I ended up designing the color line for the following year and, again would experiment with dyes. Then what he did, he would take my suggestions to the big manufacturers in New York like Bonnie Cashin and whatever she chose, they would go with because there has to be a hundred hides in a drum. Then I would be allowed to get like twenty or thirty hides from each run because I couldn't order a hundred hides. Everybody on the West Coast is punished by being on the West Coast because everything leaves New York FOB, freight on board, and so if it takes ten days for the raw material to arrive you already have lost ten days of a thirty day timeline to pay the bill. So that was another aspect of it.

After the jacket appeared on the inside cover of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1950, a representative of Hearst magazines came to see me. Now at this time I was struggling to keep my marriage together with Jim. They offered to bring me to New York and set me up in a studio where I would design for large-scale tanneries like Wood and Hyde and I could be in a class with Bonnie Cashin and various other designers. I decided, number one, I didn't want to leave North Beach [laughter] and I didn't want to leave Jim. I said, "Well, thanks a lot but no, thanks, I'll stay here." It was one of those things that happens





in your life where you – like Frost’s poem *The Road Not Taken* – and I wondered how different my life would be if that had happened. But it was like... it was another turning point. There had been another one in Washington, D.C. where I was working for the Office of War Information and Dr. Badeau, who had been President at the American University at Cairo, in the OSS for the Middle East at that time. The OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, later became the CIA. Dr. Badeau invited me to come to the University of Cairo after the war and work with him as his executive secretary and I turned that down. At that time Jim was in the Navy and I had said, “Well, what about my husband?” He said, “Oh, well, you’d bring him with you,” and so on. Again, that was a road not taken. There are these moments in one’s life where there’s this idle curiosity, this “what if”, but I’m very glad I decided to do what I did and I have to tell you that the importance of North Beach to me was a strong factor in my decision not to go to New York. New York wouldn’t have what I had, the support of the community and the whole general feeling, I didn’t want to give that up.

VALERIE: So we’re still around 1950 ...

RHODA: Well, we’ve also gone into 1955, which was the first Grant Avenue Street Fair.

VALERIE: Right. I’m curious about what happened then. You said you and Jim divorced and there you were running the business yourself. What was your life like then between 1950 and 1955?



RHODA: It was wild. [laughter] It was really great. I was like bursting out of a shell. I mean I was on my own, and I had my own business and, wow, a liberated woman and it was fun. There was a man named Jean Varda who had a houseboat in Sausalito, a wonderful artist, absolutely wonderful. I was going to parties, I was going to openings. I was going to concerts, and I was out there, as it were. I remember going to a concert in San Francisco, I think it was at Marines Memorial, and there were two very attractive men in the row that I was sitting in and I managed to talk to them at the intermission. One of them, Boris, was an insurance man but had been born in Shanghai. He was a Russian émigré. And the other one was a young lawyer, Bill, who worked with the Heller, Ehrman, White, & McAuliffe law firm in San Francisco. I really liked both of them and we went off for a drink afterward and Boris mentioned that he had this friend, Jean Varda, the Greek who lived on this houseboat, and Varda was having a Halloween party and did I want to go. I said, "Yes, sure." It turned out that the lawyer lived on Telegraph Hill just right up the hill from me. So, anyway, we became good friends. At that time there was also a friend of mine named Nobuo Kitagaki. He was a young Japanese man from Oakland who had been interned with his family, I guess in the desert [during WW II]. After the war, he had gone to the University of Chicago Art School and now was in business with his father making screens and also doing paintings. Well, Kitagaki was a terrific designer and he and the lawyer and several other friends decided that I should go to the Halloween party. I decided I wanted to go as a witch, junior grade. So I put on my black leotard with the long pants and the long sleeves and Kit painted designs on my legs of vines and flowers and so on going all the way up. It was great fun, everybody stood around watching while he painted on me. Then I designed a circular



wool cape with a hood and used makeup to kind of wipe out my face and draw my eyebrows up into my temples and I had long hair which I just combed absolutely straight. The lawyer decided to go as a gorilla in a gorilla suit and as we were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge to go to the party on the houseboat, he pulled his gorilla head over his face and handed the toll taker the fare with his paws and then sped up and we're all craning our necks back to look at the toll taker. [chuckle] It was fun. We got to the party and Bill had taken the mask off his head, so I got on his shoulders with one of those jeroboams of wine and we walked about the room and I would pour wine from my shoulder thing into people's glasses. At one point I said, "Aren't you dying of heat in that gorilla suit?" He said, "Yes, but I can't take it off because I only have underwear on [chuckle] underneath. And that was a party where people fell into the Bay and we would try to rescue them. Some of them didn't want to be rescued, because they liked swimming in the Bay, but Varda insisted that we go out in a boat and pull them in.

That was a time when [I met] Wolo, the puppeteer; he's another one of the characters in this whole scene. Wolo lived in a loft on Pacific and I would have parties in my flat upstairs where Varda would come and tell stories of his life in Greece. Varda had a theory of recounting the history of the world according to the way people dispose of their garbage. [laughter] One night he held forth until about four in the morning; it was really hilarious. Then we went to a restaurant on Broadway, the Basque Hotel. I don't know if it's still there, but that hotel hosted shepherds from the Basque country in Spain as they were making their way to the high country [in the Sierras] to herd sheep. This was a place where dinners were served – I don't know what it's called, it's a prix fixe, it's a set





Peter Macchiarini addresses  
Street Fair Banquet in honor  
of fellow artist, Wolo at  
New Pisa Res. mid 1970's

Street Fair Banquet  
(with permission of Danny Macchiarini)





dinner and there's a bottle of wine on the table and people come in and sit around these long tables. One evening there was a guitar player from Spain, one of the Basque sheep herders, and he brought his guitar out and after the restaurant closed I invited him and a couple of his friends, and they came back to the flat and played music until dawn. So that was what it was like. It was great fun, great fun.

VALERIE: It sounds like it.

RHODA: Then there were a couple of physicians. That was when the shipyards ... the shipyards in Richmond, what were they called? Kaiser. Kaiser Permanente, the whole idea of the Kaiser Permanente Health Plan came into being. So idealistic doctors from all parts of the country came because this is when the Kaiser Foundation was a cooperative and two of those physicians lived up on the hill and Jeb Hunter, the woman physician, became one of my customers. So when I got divorced from Jim, the divorce was final I think in 1952, the Hunters gave a party for me [and called it], "Come As You Feel The Freest" and Boris showed up in a suit, vest, tie, homburg, spats, and cane. [laughter] That gives you a bit of a feeling of Boris' character. I went in a tutu. [laughter] So that, again – and they lived in a – it might be a house that still exists, built by a famous architect. The house looked out over the Bay. They had a lot of parties and the Hunters decided to host a fashion show for me for all the doctors at Permanente, so there was a whole new group of customers. This is the kind of thing that just kept happening. When I said it was a wild time, it was exhilarating and exciting and fulfilling and fun and a time to explore all kinds of things.



Later on there was a fashion editor, Bernadette Schneider, on the *Call-Bulletin* or the *Chronicle*, I can't remember which. She wore one my jackets back to New York and was stopped by half a dozen people. "Where did you get that jacket? Where did you get that suit?" So my reputation spread but the income didn't match the fashion. I remember doing an interview on television with one of the fashion editors for the *Chronicle*. The person who was supposed to show up after the interview that afternoon didn't show up on time. She wanted to know if we could ad lib for a bit and I said sure. So we just talked about colors for fall. It was the kind of thing that I could talk about without any problem at all. So this was all part of that exciting period.

VALERIE: It sounds wonderful.

RHODA: It was just absolutely great. Then I met Ric Skahen, my second husband, through Felix Rosenthal, whom I had mentioned before, the man who had the crazy idea for the banners across Grant Avenue.

VALERIE: What year did you meet Ric?

RHODA: I met him in 1954 and we got married in '55.

VALERIE: So that was the end of your wild life?





**Rhoda Pack Curtis, 2006**





